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# Bush's China Agony

LONDON—A few nights before Christmas, the lights blazed bright at the Washington residence of Chinese ambassador Han Xu. After dinner, the guests went into the drawing room for an unexpected treat. Two members of the embassy staff led the company in singing Christmas carols. The singing was in both languages, and there was much laughter and joshing as the Americans stumbled over the phonetic Chinese in their song sheets and the Chinese tried to get their tongues around the accelerating English lyrics of "The 12 Days of Christmas."

It was a memorable scene, made more so by the fact that at the center of the circle, clearly enjoying the fun and fellowship, were Barbara Bush and her husband, the president-elect of the United States.

This was a private occasion, not a state function. It was an invitation the Bushes chose to accept, from the hundreds available to them, because of their feeling for the ambassador and his wife and for China. It was, unmistakably, an evening of friendship, almost a family gathering, which ended with warm affirmations, on both sides, of a desire to share more such protocol-free gatherings during the Bushes' White House years.

That scene has returned often to mind as the president wrestled with his response to the sickening slide of events in Beijing. This is not just a foreign policy problem for Bush. It is not just a calculus of how to maintain opportunities for trade or a balance of power in Asia.

It does more than test his commitment to human rights against his recognition of the value of the Chinese sites from which we monitor Soviet space and missile launches and the other benefits which, Bush noted in his news conference yesterday, the United States derives from the bilateral relationship. It challenges him in a poignantly personal way.

China is the nation in the world, aside from the United States, that has a strong hold on the affection of the Bushes. It was the one experience they found unreservedly enjoyable and uplifting in the decade of the 1970s, a 10-year span that began with his loss of a Senate race and ended with his defeat for the Republican presidential nomination.

Compared to the experience as chairman of the Republican National Committee during Watergate, which came before the sojourn in China, and rebuilding the Central Intelligence Agency from the Nixon-era scandals, which came afterward, the interlude in Beijing, as head of the U.S. liaison office, was a delightful respite.

Barbara Bush went cycling through the city and the countryside, making friends as she went. George Bush used the tennis court to meet people who would otherwise have been out of reach for an envoy to a government with which the United States did not have formal diplomatic relations.

Although they were called home early when President Ford needed help at the CIA, the Bushes were fondly remembered in Beijing. In the first year of the Carter administration, when few Americans imagined that George Bush might have an important role in the nation's future, the Chinese extended hospitality. The Bushes were invited back, as private citizens, received by Deng Xiaoping and allowed to visit all the sites they had requested—including Tibet. Their party included James A. Baker III, now secretary of state, and James Lilley, now ambassador to China, so the Chinese knew what they were doing.

The Bushes went back to China several times during his vice presidential years and, over the objections of some State Department bureaucrats, visited Beijing in the first month of his presidency after attending Emperor Hirohito's funeral. To those officials who insisted there should be a reason for visiting a Communist capital and careful preparation for the talks, Bush replied, in effect, that he felt it would be rude to be in the neighborhood and not pay a call on old friends.

Friends they have in plenty in Beijing, not only among the top officials but among the younger generation of foreign office and central government bureaucrats, who have served as escorts and translators for the Bushes and the many family members and friends they have urged to visit China.

The Washington Post  
The New York Times  
The Washington Times  
The Wall Street Journal  
The Christian Science Monitor  
New York Daily News  
USA Today  
The Chicago Tribune

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As some of those aging top officials order purges and public executions in an effort to stifle dissent, the Bushes' thoughts must turn to those younger Chinese friends, men and women the ages of their own children, people who must be cruelly trapped between their duties and careers on one side and their sympathies on the other.

The Bushes were never blind to the philosophical gulf between Communist ideology and the value system that underlies our concept of democracy. They knew how tough a nut Deng had to be to survive. They also knew there was a long Chinese tradition, which the Communists continued, of indifference to human life. But until now, all their personal experiences with the Chinese made them believe that friendship, freely given and eagerly reciprocated, could bridge those differences.

It must be hard—agonizingly hard—to recognize that may not be the case.